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THE OMEN IN HERODOTUS VI. 107

BY CAMPBELL BONNER

Herodotus (vi. 107) relates an odd, half-comical incident of the landing of the Persians in Attica. The aged Hippias, who had had an ominous dream the night before (ἐδόκεε τῇ μητρὶ συνευνηθῆναι), and had interpreted it as betokening his repatriation,¹ was greatly dispirited by a peculiar happening on the next day. Shortly after going ashore he was seized by a violent fit of coughing or sneezing, which so loosened his teeth that one fell out. He was at pains to find it (ἐποιέετο πολλὴν σπουδὴν ἐξευρεῖν), but the search was unsuccessful. Whereupon, ἀναστενάζας εἶπε πρὸς τοὺς παραστάντας “ἡ γῇ ἦδε οὐκ ἡμετέρη ἐστί, οὐδέ μιν δυνησόμεθα ὑποχειρίην ποιήσασθαι· ὁκόσον δ’ ἔτι μοι μέρος μετῆν, ὁ ὁδὸν μετέχει.” Ἰππίης μὲν δὲ ταύτῃ τὴν ὄψιν συνεβάλετο ἐξεληλυθέναί.

The superstitious fear of the old Peisistratid seems to be only in part explained by the sinister interpretation given by him to the fact that his tooth had found a burial-place in Attic soil. The anxiety that he manifested even before the search proved hopeless needs further explanation. Here, perhaps, we may find help in ancient and modern folklore. Among the dream-omens that form part of the fast-disappearing folklore of our southern states there is a fairly common one² to the effect that to dream of a tooth falling out portends a misfortune, which is usually particularized as the death of a friend or relative. Some add that if the tooth has blood upon it, the relative will be a near one. That this is one of the many bits of European superstition that have been retained with singular tenacity by the rural population of the South seems to be proved by a comparison of the material collected in Brand's *Popular Antiquities of Great Britain* III, pp. 129 ff.³ I quote two passages there cited:

¹ For this interpretation cf. Artemidorus *Onirocr.* i. 79 (pp. 76, 77 Hercher).

² Reported by several members of a folklore club organized in the Peabody College.

³ Much of the same material in Hazlitt's *Faiths and Folklore* I, pp. 189 f.

Lyly's *Sapho and Phao* (1584), act iv, sc. 3: "I dreamed," says Ismena, "mine eye tooth was loose, and that I thrust it out with my tongue." "It fortelleth," replies Mileta, "the losse of a friend."

The Countryman's Counsellor (1633), p. 330: "To lose an axle toth or an eye, the death of some friend; to dream of bloody teeth, the death of the dreamer."

Some of the old commonplace books (cf. Brand III, p. 133) refer to Artemidorus as the source of this interpretation. It may well be doubted whether the compilers had consulted the ancient oneirocritic, yet due allowance must be made for the possibility of a vague and inexact tradition of the doctrines of Artemidorus through the dream-books of the Middle Ages. However, the symbolism of the tooth in such dreams evidently appealed to the vulgar understanding, and the popular belief may have existed beside, not through, a literary tradition.

The omen in question is also known among the modern Greeks. My informant is an intelligent Greek merchant some years settled in this country, a native of Vostitza and for many years a resident of Athens. He says he has often heard it said that a dream of losing a tooth forebodes death. If the tooth falls out without pain, it signifies the death of a friend or a distant relative; if it gives pain, a near kinsman will die.

Artemidorus (i. 31; cf. also ii. 67) treats the tooth-omen, after his wont, with a systematic minuteness that warns us to accept only the nucleus of his discussion as the expression of a genuine popular superstition. To follow him through his three pages of subtleties would be both tedious and unprofitable. The following extracts will suffice. The mouth, he says, is to be regarded as a house, the teeth as the persons connected with it. The upper teeth are persons of higher station, the lower those of inferior rank. Those on the right side are men, those on the left women. Front teeth represent young people, canines those in middle life, molars are the aged. *ὁποῖον οὖν ἄν τις ἀποβάλῃ ὀδόντα, τοιούτου ἀνθρώπου στερηθήσεται*. Again, since teeth may represent material possessions as well as human beings, the loss of a tooth may signify the loss of property.

So much seems fairly clear, that the dream of losing a tooth, which, for whatever physiological reason, appears to be a common

one, symbolized to the superstitious contemporaries of Artemidorus a bereavement or a loss of some kind. Now students of folklore have learned to make allowance for the longevity of popular superstitions, and have observed that such beliefs, even when they are of very ancient origin, are frequently passed in silence by classical authors, who make no secret of their contempt for old wives' tales, to be recorded only in the age of decadence. It seems, then, at least possible that this particular superstition had its part in the story of Hippias. It is true that the happening related by Herodotus purports to be an actual occurrence, not a dream; and it is also true that a misfortune incident to mere senile decay would not ordinarily have an ominous significance. But following a portentous dream and accompanied by the ominous sneeze,¹ the petty accident might have had for Hippias—or for the inventor of the story²—as fateful a meaning as the dream omen. What is an unfavorable prognostication in waking hours may also be inauspicious if seen in a dream. Cf. Artem. i. 22, *πλέουσι δὲ διαρρήδην ναυάγιον σημαίνει sc. τὸ ξυρεῖσθαι τὴν κεφαλὴν*, with Petronius *Sat.* 104, *audio enim non licere cuiquam mortalium in naue neque unguis neque capillos deponere nisi cum pelago uentus irascitur*. Some interesting modern instances of this superstition are given by Frazer *Golden Bough*² I, p. 378. Another example is to be found in J. G. Campbell's *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*, pp. 236 f.: "A person should not comb his hair at night, or, if he does, every hair that comes out should be put in the fire. Otherwise they will meet his feet in the dark and make him stumble. *No girl should comb her hair at night if she have a brother at sea.*" It seems a justifiable assumption that, conversely, circumstances might lend to a trifling accident, ordinarily unregarded, all the superstitious terror with which it was invested in the symbolism of dreams.

It must not be forgotten that the mere loss of any appurtenance of the body has been regarded with uneasiness by the

¹ Cf. Valckenaer's note *ad loc.* From midnight until noon it was considered unlucky to sneeze, according to Arist. *Probl.*, p. 962 b. 19.

² Macan's skepticism is not without foundation. See his note on the passage.

superstitious of all ages. Herein, perhaps, lies the ultimate origin of the sinister interpretation given to the dream in question. Through the medium of that which he has lost, a person may be subjected to the evil machinations of an enemy or of a malignant demon. In Theocr. ii. 53 Simaetha burns a bit of the fringe from her lost lover's mantle in order to regain her influence over him. The sorceress in Luc. *Dial. Mer.* 4. 5 (quoted by Fritzsche-Hiller on Theocr. *loc. cit.*) makes use of the shoes of a slippery gallant. In Apuleius *Met.* iii. 18 the witch Pamphile ties into knots¹ and burns what she believes to be the hair of the youth upon whom she has designs. See also Eur. *Hippol.* 513 ff., and Harry's note. For the general idea, cf. Tylor *Primitive Culture* I, p. 116, Lang *Myth, Ritual, and Religion* I, p. 96.

Modern examples are not lacking. The Hawaiian wizard "must possess himself of some object closely associated with the person he intends to kill" by enchantment. "Finger-nails, hair, and teeth are especially desired."² "The celebrated Countess of Dorset, Pembroke, and Montgomery, according to her *Day Book*, cited by Southey, was accustomed to pare the nails of her hands and feet, and burn them afterwards."³ Most children, at least in the southern states, are jestingly warned to burn their milk-teeth as they shed them, because, if one is thrown out and trodden upon by a dog or a pig, a tusk will grow in its place. Originally, no doubt, the idea was that the lost tooth might become the medium for the exercise of witchcraft.⁴

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¹ *καράδεσις*; cf. Theocr. ii. 3.

² C. M. Skinner *Myths and Legends of Our New Possessions*, p. 266.

³ Hazlitt *Faiths and Folklore* II, p. 430.

⁴ Cf. Elworthy *The Evil Eye*, p. 76.